

Jonathan Franzen Despairs of a Planet Inhospitable to Birds; Nonfiction

The New York Times

December 3, 2018 Monday 19:43 EST

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Section: BOOKS; review

Length: 1009 words

Byline: Bill McKibben

Highlight: In his new collection of essays, “The End of the End of the Earth,” Franzen complains about groups that emphasize climate change at the expense of conservation.

Body

THE END OF THE END OF THE EARTH

Essays

By Jonathan Franzen

240 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$26.

When something really captures his interest, Jonathan Franzen is an engaged and engaging reporter. Which is to say, two essays in his new collection, “The End of the End of the Earth,” truly expand one’s knowledge of the world.

In the first, “May Your Life Be Ruined,” he describes the post-Communist surge in Albanian bird hunting, an ongoing cannonade that has turned the country into a “giant sinkhole for eastern European migratory biomass: Millions of birds fly in and very few get out alive.” He talks to hunters, to game wardens, to a confused urbanite who explains the euphoria of being allowed to own a gun: “It was like when summer comes and you feel like jumping in the ocean.”

The other essay, “Invisible Losses,” is similar: an account of efforts to protect “the world of seabirds, which encompasses two-thirds of our planet but is mostly invisible to us.” He visits breeding grounds and talks with scientists eradicating rodents; he tracks down the conservationists who have forced through regulations to dramatically reduce the number of albatross snared on fishing hooks. The piece is the product of curiosity — he’s turning over rocks along the shore and finding noteworthy details beneath.

That makes it more the shame that he usually opts for something much easier. Most of the pieces in this book fall into the loose category of personal essay. Some are travelogues, mostly about his high-end and self-consciously “compulsive” pursuit of adding species to his many lists of the birds he’s encountered. (It seems to be all about knowing which guides to hire to take you to the locations of rare “endemics” unique to whatever island or jungle you’ve visited, though there is a moment of triumph when Franzen discovers an emperor penguin that no one else on his Lindblad Antarctic cruise has noticed.) If you are a bird lister, you may find this thrilling; in literary terms, though, Kenn Kaufman’s account in “Kingbird Highway” was a good deal more picaresque, mostly because he was making his voyages without any money.

But if Franzen’s travel writing is unexceptional, it’s better than his political essays, which suffer from being underthought and over-emoted, the chief feeling often being a kind of self-absorbed peevishness. The key example here is a piece called “Save What You Love.” As he tells the story, he was “already not in a good mood” when he read a news release from the Audubon Society explaining that climate change was “the greatest threat” to America’s birds. That statement deepened his tetchy ill humor, because he believed that it might distract bird lovers from what he

considered the more immediate work of protecting habitat. "I felt bullied by its dominance," he writes of global warming, and so he conceived of the essay, which turns into an extended whine about environmental groups for focusing so heavily on carbon emissions.

The obvious response, of course, is that one could work on both climate and conservation, which Audubon does (and not Audubon alone; to cite the example closest at hand, I've spent much of my life organizing around climate justice, but also found time to serve for many years on the board of the Adirondack chapter of the Nature Conservancy as it saved hundreds of thousands of acres). But even this misses the point, which is that there are in fact enormous villains in the climate story, but they don't work at environmental groups. Franzen's only mention of the oil industry is to dismiss its influence: "The reason the American political system can't deliver action isn't simply that fossil-fuel corporations sponsor denialists and buy elections." In fact, that is the biggest single reason. In 2015, the same year the essay here titled "Save What You Love" was published in *The New Yorker*, a team of journalists conducting exhaustive interviews with whistle-blowers and digging in archives uncovered that oil companies had known all about climate change since the early 1980s and engaged in a massive cover-up that led to our withdrawal from the Paris climate accords. If you sit down to write about climate change and end up concentrating your fire on the Audubon Society, you've lost the plot.

It's unseemly to take digs at those who are trying to actually do something about the problem. Franzen includes a little jab at the writer and activist Naomi Klein for arguing that "the time is right" for societies to tackle climate change. But over the last decade a vast climate-justice campaign, of which Klein is a part, has actually won significant victories: keeping Shell from opening the Arctic to oil-drilling, blocking pipelines, banning fracking across many territories including Franzen's former home state, New York, and pushing his current residence, California, to pledge it will convert to 100 percent renewable energy.

One reason Franzen wants to concentrate on immediate conservation tasks is that he's more or less given up on fighting climate change. He's convinced himself that the "most likely rise in temperature this century is on the order of six degrees." That's actually an overstatement, an eventuality only if we don't make a powerful attempt to change our ways. If we do, the damage will be bad enough (the one degree Celsius we've so far raised the temperature has caused plenty of havoc already), but perhaps we will stop short of wiping out the base for our civilization (and with it much of the rest of the planet's DNA, avian as well as primate). As he points out, individual action at this point will not amount to much; all the more reason for thought leaders like Franzen to join in building movements to prevent the worst outcomes. Bitching about those who are making the attempt seems a sad waste of precious time.

Bill McKibben is the founder of 350.org, the Schumann distinguished scholar at Middlebury and the author of the forthcoming "Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?"

PHOTO: Jonathan Franzen (PHOTOGRAPH BY SHELBY GRAHAM)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: Review

Publication-Type: Web Publication

Subject: BIRDS (90%); BOOK REVIEWS (90%); CONSERVATION (90%); NON FICTION LITERATURE (90%); CLIMATE CHANGE (89%); LITERATURE (79%); BIRDING (78%); ENVIRONMENTAL & WILDLIFE ORGANIZATIONS (78%); WILDLIFE (77%); ENVIRONMENTALISM (73%); ECOSYSTEMS & HABITATS (72%); HABITAT CONSERVATION (72%); COMMUNISM (71%); RODENTS (71%); SPORT HUNTING (71%); Books and Literature (%); Global Warming (%); Audubon Society, National (%); Franzen, Jonathan (%)

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Organization: NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY (59%)

Industry: BOOK REVIEWS (90%)

Person: Franzen, Jonathan

Geographic: EARTH (93%); ALBANIA (77%)

Load-Date: September 27, 2021

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